THE PEABODY PLAYHOUSE

The Peabody Playhouse, part of the plan for a seven story building at 357 Charles Street, became integral to the Peabody Associations legacy. The theater was inspired in part by the great success of the nation’s first community theater associated with Chicago’s Hull House. Jane Addams planned the Hull House Theater in 1899 stemming from her belief that the immigrant community would benefit from the productions at the theater. Catering to an ethnically diverse audience the playhouse grew more and more popular as it put on Greek plays of antiquity in their original language and Shakespeare.

The Elizabeth Peabody Playhouse was planned with the advice of Professor George P Baker. Mr. Forest Izard aided in the construction of the stage and the acoustics were handled by Dean Sabine. The resulting theater seated close to four hundred people, and was well ventilated so that it would be cool in summer and warm in winter. The atmosphere of the theater is described by Billy Barnum who grew up in the West End and participated in some of the theater’s productions, “…there were some wonderful productions there, and that theater was one of the most wonderful theaters in Boston, because it had atmosphere. It was just seething with atmosphere. We would get good audience at the Peabody Playhouse.”

The Playhouse offered something very different from the Peabody House’s industrial and homemaking classes. It opened up the possibility of a performing arts career for participants including its most famous Alumna Leonard Nimoy and Ruth Roman. The Playhouse put on culturally diverse plays and provided spaces for film screenings, pantomimes, public lectures and celebrations. Eva Whiting White, head resident at the time, argued that the people of the West End would benefit in the same way that the community surrounding Chicago’s Hull House did, finding wholesome entertainment in the theater. Speaking on behalf of the playhouse project White said, “Just think what such an opportunity it will mean to the West End Italians, Jews and Germans to witness and perhaps take part in the plays produced in their own tongue.”